Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal – Vol.2, No.3
Publication Date: March 25, 2015
DOI:10.14738/assrj.23.1039.
Machado. M.I.P.C., & Coimbra. M.D.N.C.T. (2015). Using Cooperative Learning in a Grammar Workshop: A Case study on Students Perceptions. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal,* 2*(3)* 162-168.

Using Cooperative Learning In a Grammar Workshop: A Case Study on Students´ Perceptions

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Abstract

This work intends to study the effectiveness of the application of cooperative learning techniques in grammar, in the context of a Grammar Workshop, in Portuguese as mother tongue. It was used a qualitative approach, a case study, focused on group work, comprising students of the 9th grade, in a public Portuguese school. The results show that students have different perceptions regarding the teaching and learning of grammar, although they all recognize its importance for the development of language and communication skills. The students point out some advantages of the method of cooperative learning, such as the easiness of learning grammar and the improvement of their academic results on Portuguese language. They also refer a more positive attitude towards learning grammar, together with the development of linguistic and social skills.

Keywords: Cooperative learning, Grammar Workshop, Portuguese as mother tongue, case study.

INTRODUCTION

When compared with other subjects, the language class, as mother tongue, has some specifications. As Walsh (2006) mentions, the language is the means of communication and, at the same time, the very object of analysis. It is not easy to conciliate the obligation to comply with an extensive programme with students' motivations or to raise their commitment to overcome recurrent language difficulties. Moreover, it is recognized that one of the areas in which students show greater difficulties is precisely the grammar. So, teachers have the difficult task to become effective facilitators of their students´ learning, encouraging them to develop autonomous learning strategies about grammar.

Therefore, this case study research, based on the implementation of a Portuguese Grammar Workshop, emerges as a way of trying to overcome an overall picture of language difficulties, in Portuguese as mother tongue.

Teaching And Learning Grammar

Although traditionally grammar is seen as one of the most emblematic areas of the teaching of mother tongue, it is also one of the most problematic ones. For a long time, teaching Portuguese as a mother tongue was equivalent to teach, almost exclusively, grammar and literature (Allwright, 2003). Consequently, the methodologies, frequently used in the teaching of grammar, remained unchanged for years, limiting the structural study of language to the memorization of rules (Cook, 2003).

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However, from the beginning of this century, the grammatical competence gained a new protagonism in the curriculum and practices, linking linguistic theories and pedagogical practices and considering that grammatical competence is essential for full communicative competence, the main goal of language teaching. In order to improve language understanding and communication, students need to develop a high level of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence (Hymes, 1972). Thus, the teaching and learning of grammar can not only help to improve speaking, reading and writing skills, but also facilitate cross-development of analytical skills, synthesis and abstraction (Norris & Ortega, 2006), deepening cross-cognitive skills in all curricular subjects.

Therefore, it is urgent, as Reis stated (2008, p. 239), "to be established or reinforced in the class of Portuguese, the teaching of grammar". Although grammar is not the sole answer to every language problem, it may be one of the possible solutions to a quality education in Portuguese as mother tongue (Zayas, 2006). Especially if it is seen in a perspective of workshop in the classroom, as we did in our study.

Grammar And Cooperative Learning

In the attempt to reformulate the teaching of grammar, some authors (Benjamin & Berger, 2010; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008) highlight the importance of selecting active methods. It is in this context that the Grammar Workshop, based on cooperative learning, appeared and it was started in Portugal, by Duarte, in 1992.

Regarding the cooperative learning, the researchers Balkcom (1992), Fathman and Kessler (1993) and Johnson and Johnson (1999) consider it a teaching-learning method, developed in group work, organized so that all their elements interact and can be evaluated, both individually and in group. Similarly, Argyle (2013) explains that cooperation is working together in an organized manner, to achieve common goals, either because students feel happy to share activities, or for mutual benefits.

The theoretical foundations of cooperative learning allow to distinguish the traditional technique of group work from an effective cooperative learning. As Pujolàs explained (2009, 2001), while in cooperative working group we can find positive interdependence and individual responsibility, that is not evident in the traditional workgroup. In a cooperative learning group, leadership and responsabilities are shared, while in the traditional working group they are often assumed by a student and, in most cases, they are not shared. This means that in the traditional group, students do not care so much about the learning, focusing more on the task. In contrast, in a cooperative learning group there is a distribution of work, so that each individual contributes to his/her success and to the group members´ (Argyle, 2013).

There are significant differences in the teacher's role. In the traditional learning group the teacher does not always observe the group, and does not evaluate systematically its functioning. However, in the cooperative learning group, the teacher observes and intervenes, giving constant feedback of performance and motivating students for self and hetero evaluation (Arends, 2011).

Thus, regarding cooperative learning, students should interiorise some rules and put them into practice, in their activities, since the establishment of cooperative groups and the allocation of group members´ functions, as well as the distribution, implementation and evaluation of work demands a complex degree of structure.

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METHODOLOGY

In this case study research, we chose a qualitative approach, seeking to understand a specific context and to analyze its complexity (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2011).

Therefore, this educational research had, as main objective, to analyze the effects of the implementation of a Grammar Workshop, based on the principles of cooperative learning, in language development and academic results, in the Portuguese as mother tongue, of 9 th grade students.

We defined as specific objectives: (1) to analyze the perceptions of 9th grade students, in relation to the learning of grammar; (2) to verify the effectiveness of the implementation of cooperative learning techniques in grammar, in the classroom context; (3) to identify the potential and constraints of the cooperative learning method in the teaching of grammar; (4) to relate the implementation of the Grammar Workshop with the language development and academic achievement in the Portuguese subject.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' perceptions of learning grammar

In the first questionnaire survey, the aim was to know the students' perceptions related to the study of grammar and the planning, monitoring and evaluation of their own work, using cooperative learning strategies.

The data revealed that the majority of students considered important the teaching-learning process of grammar. Students identified the characteristics of learning grammar, recognizing the application of grammar to new situations in everyday life, and its role in the knowledge of language structures. They admitted that it contributes to the improvement of the use of the Portuguese language and it enhances their language development. Students understand the importance of the study of grammar, not only because it enables the correct use of the language, but also because it encourages the improvement of mother tongue and contributes to academic success. We can read their opinions in the following transcripts:

> **S24:** "It's very interesting to learn and go beyond what we know."
> **S33:** "This way I can read and write better Portuguese."
> **S40:** "To improve the test marks."

As the main difficulty in the study of grammar, the students identify systematic learning, and grammar complexity. They also mention the confusion between some concepts and the difficulty of applying grammatical knowledge to oral and written expression.

Students who identify group learning, as the best learning strategy, highlight the sharing of ideas, the mutual aid, and also the possibility of observing how others learn. The transcriptions that follow show the advantages of group learning.

> **S2:** "As a group, we help each other."
> **S29:** "Because I feel safer and it's easier to put my doubts to colleagues."
> **S65:** "As a group, if I do not understand, someone notices and seeing as he does, I understand better."

In general, students enhance the functionality of grammar, but they also realise the difficulties experienced in the appropriation of more complex grammatical contents.

Academic achievment and test results

We started with the application of a Diagnosis Test, which intended to evaluate the previous knowledge of the students.

Table 1- Results of the Diagnosis Test

Level	1	2	3	4	5
Number of students	10	57	12	1	-
%	13%	71%	15%	1%	-

The results, displayed in table 1, were predominantly negative, with the overall average not exceeding 34%. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest level), about 12 students (15%) achieved level 3, and only one student (1%) had level 4.

Based on these data, we conclude that, at the beginning of the school year, the majority of students did not have the necessary prerequisites, in what concerns the lexicon, morphology, syntax and sentence. These results demonstrate the grammatical gaps of students, proving the need for a systematic work during the school year, using the method of cooperative learning, in a Grammar Workshop.

Students' Results in Internal Testing and Final Exam

During the educational intervention, the students held Formative Assessment Tests (9 in total). We compared their results with those obtained in the Diagnostic Test.

Looking at the results obtained in the Formative Assessment Tests, we noticed a significant increase in positive results, even if, in the process, there were average fluctuations.

Table 2- Formative Assessment Tests' Results

Tests	Diagnosis test	Test 1	Test 2	Test 3	Test 4	Test 5	Test 6	Test 7	Test 8	Test 9
Global average	34%	63%	57%	66%	53%	63%	57%	53%	47%	57%

Analyzing the results of table 2, we found a significant increase in positive levels obtained by the students. Thus, in the 9 tests applied, the global average was around 57.3%, 23.3% more than in the Diagnosis Test, showing the progression of teaching and learning, and the relevance of the implementation of the Grammar Workshop. The oscillations of the results confirm learning gaps, especially in syntax and sentence. Consequently, reformulations were focused in the design of learning sequences, in order to enhance Grammar Workshop and overcome students´ difficulties.

Table 3- Final Exams' Results

Level		School Years				
		2011/2012	2012/2013	Difference 2012/2013	2013/2014	Differnece 2013/2014
Negativ level	1	20	35	+ 15	5	- 30
	2	60	58	- 2	42	- 16
Positive level	3	14	6	- 8	35	+ 29
	4	6	1	- 5	15	+ 14
	5	0	0	0	3	+ 3

Regarding the Final Exam, the results obtained by students, in the two academic years immediately preceding the Grammar Workshop (2011-2013) were frankly negative, as we can

see in table 3. In the academic year of 2011-2012, the percentage of students with level 3 were 14% and with level 4, 6%. Concerning the 2012-2013 school year, the percentage of students with level 3 were 6% and with level 4, 1%. In contrast, in the school year of the study, 2013-2014, about 28 students (35%) had level 3, 12 students (15%) had level 4 and 2 (3%) level 5. These results show a progression in the performance of grammatical contents.

We can conclude that the cooperative learning method contributed to these students' academic success in Portuguese as mother tongue. In fact, there is a clear trend of students with a very significant reduction in negative ratings, from 80% in the school year of 2011-2012, and 93% in 2012-2013, to 47% in 2013-2014.

In conclusion, students in the 9th grade effectively achieved academic success in Portuguese, after the application of Grammar Workshop.

Students' Perceptions of Cooperative Learning

A week after the end of the Grammar Workshop, we asked students to complete a final questionnaire. We wanted to know their opinions about the cooperative working groups. Students referred their preferred aspects, which included the possibility of interacting with colleagues, answering questions in group, as well as the divison of tasks, the easiness of learning, and more interesting classes.

We present some illustrative examples of the students' descriptive answers on their preferences:

> **S5:** "I could share my views, hear the opinions of others, I learned a few more things and when we had questions we could share them."
> **S43:** "With this method, learning is funnier and we can learn from others."

As far as the difficulties experienced during the lessons are concerned, we found that the concentration, the complexity of grammatical content (especially syntax and sentence), time management and, finally, the cohesion of the group, were the most frequently mentioned.

As for the advantages of cooperative learning, students mentioned the easiness of learning, sharing of ideas, solving doubts and the interaction with colleagues. They identified the advantages of the cooperative learning method, emphasizing the richness of the diversity of opinions and the joint efforts to help:

> **S22:** "Having different perceptions of things, according to the opinions of colleagues."
> **S50:** "We strive more to help other group members, so we understood better the matter."

Regarding the disadvantages resulting from this type of learning, we found that the lack of concentration predominates, followed by difficulties experienced in time management. These results can be illustrated by the statements that follow. Too much conversation is mentioned, in addition to the difficulty of understanding what others think and to respect their views.

> **S18:** "When we're with a group of colleagues we tend to talk."
> **S34:** "When our colleagues do not respect our opinion."
> **S49:** "Difficulty in controlling time."

Concerning the presentation of suggestions to improve cooperative learning, some students considered that this method should be introduced earlier. The views expressed suggest extending cooperative learning in workshop to other subjects, not just to Portuguese. The following answers also show that students recognize the need to strengthen their self-control.

> **S10:** "It's the perfect method, it should have been submitted earlier, because then we could have the control in order to concentrate on the proposed work."
> **S48:** "I like this method and it can not be more perfect, only we should control our conversation."
> **S75:** "Extending this method to other school matters and subjects."

We can verify that students understand that the Grammar Workshop brought a new dynamic to their classes, which, in turn, contributed to the increase of their motivation for the study of the mother tongue. As a result, students were more involved in the process of learning, which enabled the improvement of their academic results.

CONCLUSION

This study proved that students have positive perceptions and attitudes towards cooperative learning in Grammar Workshop. They are aware that it enables the deepening of grammatical and language skills, integrating new knowledge with their personal and cultural experiences. A 'positive' conflict can be generated between peers, causing the destabilization required for a cognitive and attitudinal development, both individual and collective.

The analysis also highlighted the relevance of the grammatical competence, since it turns students into better listeners and speakers, readers and writers. Therefore, the teaching and learning of grammar should occupy a prominent place in the Portuguese classes, because its importance isn´t limited to the transmission of linguistic knowledge, but also enhances the access to all curricular knowledge. Therefore, in this research, cooperation emerged as a condition for a democratic and pluralistic partnership, in which students and teachers built a journey of mutual improvement and quality. Accordingly, teachers implemented active methods, involving students and motivating their interest and commitment.

Case studies cannot be generalized beyond the particular case (Yin, 2003). However, in the context of a public school, this study confirmed the importance of cooperative learning in Portuguese as a mother tongue, deepening students´ language skills. While working for a common goal, it was possible to link communication, interaction and motivation (Slavin, 1994). As Freire explained (1997), educating means creating conditions for the exercise of the student's curiosity, as a producer of knowledge. Men and women are cultural beings, endowed with the ability to learn and the mother tongue is the instrument of this individual and collective unveiling, from childhood and throughout life.

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